THE WORLD OF ART: *Three Fine Exhibitions*

"Ruins," from Etching by Henry B. Shope.
In Exhibition at the Mussmann Gallery.

HALF the use of the past is to show us the present, and half the fun of the present is to see in our contemporaries the characteristics of the marvelous people who have grown more and more marvelous with every century passing over their fame, who gradually have lost all human semblance under the cruel touch of immortality and who find their way back only through their kinship with the men of this century. The other day a group of artists, and outsiders tolerated by them, were talking about J. Alden Weir. No one said much about his genius, that was taken for granted; but a painter spoke of his size and physical grace and the peculiar gentleness that was apt to go with co-ordinated powers. A poet, modernist, replied: "He always made me think of Sophocles, doing such tremendous things, you know, as if they didn't amount to anything." Another painter carried it on: "Well, you know, lots of people think the things that are done that way don't amount to anything—until afterward. And the little things Weir did are the most beautiful." The poet thought the same about Sophocles and quoted the choric ode to white-cliffed Colonus as more treasurable than the whole of Oedipus the King. No one agreed with him. Then the talk began to whirl about Sophocles and Weir and Greek tragedy and water colors until the chickens and the home brew came on to divert it. But out of the chaos emerged the impression of a modern painter with the "even balanced soul" of the beautiful Greek, whose pure-mindedness got into his work and showed clearest in the bright fragments that would have little importance in collected editions.

At the Ferargil Galleries this week Weir's paintings are shown in a distinguished setting, with all done for them that taste and affectionate appreciation can do in displaying their beauty to the best advantage.

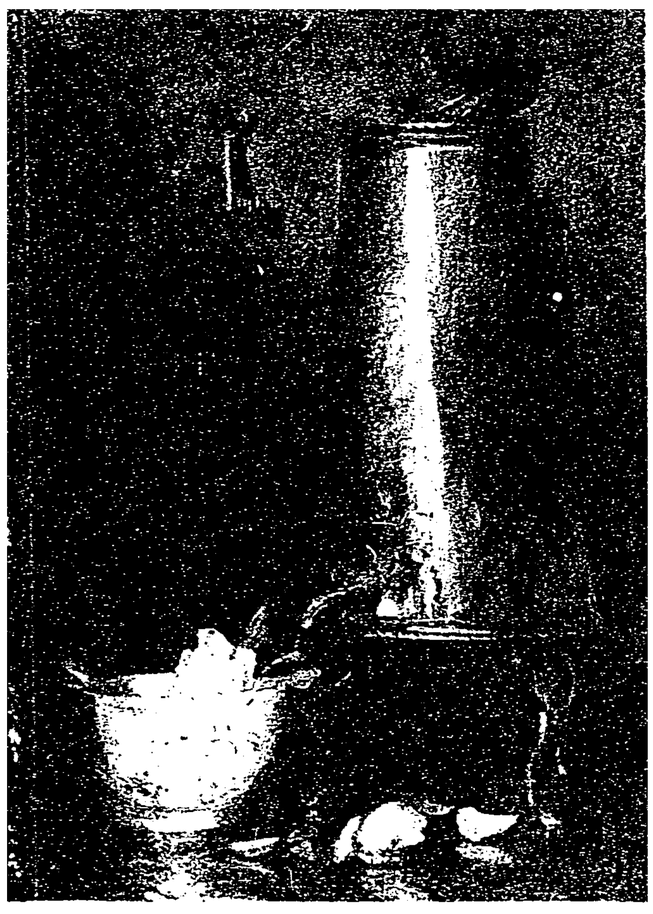
Passing them in review, it is not difficult to think that perhaps the modernist poet was right, that perhaps the white-cliffed Colonus was the perfect fragment to save which one would let the waves sweep over Oedipus the King. Certainly the "important," "ambitious," "prominent" paintings permit you to pass more quickly by than such a morsel as the bit of still life, an old copper urn, a bowl and roses, and a key on the wall. It is a dark little picture, yet full of color, and the design that of an artist accustomed to see common things nobly. There is also a pastel of a strip of sea and a couple of sailboats, delicate and vigorous. A bowl of roses against a panel of brown wood throws a foam of crimson, deepening as it rises, against the dull surface of the wood. "Summer Pastimes" shows a woman in a gown of roseleaf pink reading under a tree, and a child watching a toy boat on the neighboring lake: a commonplace subject raised to its great distinction by the sensitiveness of the color, high in key without intimation of white, and by the light, unemphatic touch. One would think such a painting devoid of accent unless one remembered what pictures devoid of accent looked like.

A portrait of a boy is a more rounded performance, with more the character of a well-turned phrase, and in this profoundly simple painting it is easy to watch the way in which the artist loses his outline at just the right place for slipping away from definiteness, and places his light so discreetly that it counts only as giving a true value to the surrounding tone. A landscape which he calls "Sunset" illustrates his withdrawal from the obvious; his sun has set in a sky hardly warmed by its faint reflection.

The landscape that gives the fullest sense of Weir's aristocracy of method and simplicity of feeling is that called "Fording the Stream." A bridge casting deep shadows on brown water, a green foreground starred with pale flowers, a warm sky, and a man driving a one-horse shay through the shallow rivulet. How nature must have filled the artist's mind to produce such art! What emotion the scene must have awakened in him and what discipline he must have used to have forced the emotion into an expression so vibrating with restraint!

Duncan Phillips has lent to the Century Club for exhibition during the month a group of paintings from the Phillips Memorial Art Gallery. The walls of the exhibition room are blooming with an unusually robust quality of art. There are pictures of romantic charm, of delicacy, sensitiveness, of humor and technical expertness; but the chief and great quality by which they are characterized is robustness, soundness, health. Take, for example, the "Alsatian Girl," by Weir—for the Weirs, five in number, admirably extend the Ferargil exhibition. This Alsatian girl by any other hand would be sweet to saccharinity; the smooth white flesh, the cupid's bow mouth, the cow-like eyes, the coquettish white headdress, nothing is abated of prettiness and the popular ideal of young womanhood. But Weir could give all of this to us and make his young woman also a human creature so perfectly and harmoniously developed, with such purity and moderation and serenity, that she brings to the mind her Grecian prototypes, deep bosomed and large limbed, with the calm of physical perfection upon their wide brows.

"An Alsatian Girl," by J. Alden Weir.
In the Phillips Memorial Collection on Exhibition at the Century Club.



"Still Life," by J. Alden Weir.
In Weir Exhibition at the Ferargil Gallery.

The exhibition contains other treasures. Here is Twachtman's "Summer," painted with heavy pigment on a coarse, ropy canvas, as wholesome a piece of craftsmanship as one could find, yet delicate and vaporous in its hints and suggestions of form and color. Here is Matthew Maris associated with Monticelli in "The Queen's Entry," a picture saturated in romance and proclaiming it through mists of tone, as though martial music were heard from a great distance; a dim picture, but sound as an apple from a guarded bough in material and execution.

Fantin Latour's "Portrait of Sonia" is another example of sanity and conscience, leavened with the esthetic passion. Years of learning at the feet of the greatest masters have gone into the execution. The textures and the expression of the substance beneath the light veiling of the surface brushwork are masterly. Daumier's "The Lawyers" is the work of a greater master, one who learned as he ran. There was no time in that tremendous life to sit at the feet of either gods or half-gods. We know from his earliest things how weak he was at the start and we know from such examples as this how muscular he grew, how easily he left his competitors behind, with what amazing power of assimilation he snatched at all that was best in what he saw and turned it into his wholesome art.

Chardin, Décamps, Monticelli, Monet, Sisley René, Ménard, Puvis de Chavannes, are the other Frenchmen represented. The Americans are strong. George Luks has "The Dominican" to affirm the heights to which his great talents may rise with a subject that compels him, and especially a subject that gives him a chance to show us how he uses white paint in large masses. The Dominican's robe is glorious painting, but it is invidious to select it for special praise, for the portrait conveys a total impression, and dominates the room with its authority and distinction. Whistler's "Lillian Woakes" is a portrait of rare sensibility and objective charm; the Italian scene by George Inness marks a period that shows the good scaffolding upon which his later structures were erected; there is a beautiful Theodore Robinson; "The Smithy" by Gari Melchers is one of his strongest; "The Willow Pool" by Childe Hassam is full of gentle movement and a bright, covert humor in the episode between the little bather and the astonished ducks; Emil Carlsen commemorates Weir's place at Windham, there are two early and beautiful examples of the work of Arthur Davies before he permitted the rhythm of his figures to be halted here and there by a crystallized gesture. A. P. Ryder, Vincent Tack, Paul Dougherty, Ernest Lawson, Walter Griffin, Robert Spencer and W. L. Lathrop are the others and there is an Italian, David Bellotto, and the British landscape painter David Cox fills out the list.

The paintings are selected with the idea of showing the range and variety of the whole collection which will be hung, when the building in Washington is erected, in carefully chosen groups based upon "esthetic harmonies and affinities of temperament and purpose."

Henry B. Shope's exhibition of etchings at the Mussmann Galleries is the first of any considerable size that he has held in this city. It reveals an unusual talent, scrupulous, delicate, personal, and with sufficient force to create an unmistakable style as rich in reserves as in expression. The landscapes are filled with an observation so loving and cognizant of each detail that the breadth of the general effect is eloquent of strong intellectual discipline. A Central Park scene, for example, the trees, deeply understood in manner of growth and idiosyncrasy of branch and foliage, lifting their heads with a light and gracious gayety in the bright air, some little boats idling on the lake, in the distance the city in a Wordsworthian peace—a very beautiful interpretation of place and hour, and the title "Sunday" descriptive in both a subtle and a simple significance. "The Hill of Maitre Nicolas," fold upon fold of rounded hill top, clouds voluminous but in texture impalpable, a dark foreground tree balanced by the sharp note of a smaller and nearer tree, a foreground sweep of meadow without incident but full of inexplicable interest. "St. Germain," a building of shaggy surfaces and mottled lights, of varied fenestration appealing to the imagination by its irregularities, in front horses plodding tandem before a two-wheeled cart, their clumsy feet lifted in a gesture that brings to our ears the precise clop-clop of the hoofs on the cobbles, all simply seen, simply rendered, yet pulsing with hints and intimations of the manifold truths withheld.

This subtle simpleness, a mark of true distinction of mind, appears in the collection in many forms. In the "Coal Barges, East River, New York," the diminishing tonal perspective declares it, and in the beautiful little mezzotint, "Ponto St. Angelo," with its gleaming foreground, dark bridge and crescent moon, the exquisite handling of the medium provides a multitude of joys definite and undefined, in the two or three square inches covered by the plate. In the "Pennsylvania Station"—a dark interior with figures, the buildings of the city obscuring the far view from the tall windows—a sudden happy outlet into space and light is given by the simple expedient of leaving one window free to the sky.

Two views of St. Thomas's Church, one a night view, all dim mystery, the detail fused in the faint light, the other a daytime version, crisp and clear, are interesting as conveying the change possible in a given subject with changing atmospheric conditions.

There is the greatest variety of theme; the architecture of European churches and the architecture of the wharves and palaces of industry on our American waterfronts; harbor scenes, and parks and the idyllic meadows of New England; trees sturdy and intricate or shadowy and tremulous; animals and birds, from elephant to pelican, all studied with a patient penetration and rendered with a gentle glee of victory.

The keen and sympathetic response of the artist's mind to the character of his subject lends interest and value to his interpretations. He sees in the buildings of the American Malting Company on the East River a chance for an architectural design of severe dignity, diagonals, horizontals and perpendiculars ranging themselves in austere formation. The Weber, McLoughlin Company's buildings are more impressive in mass, the fine columns, the huge tank, the angular winding staircase combining in an effect of great architectural features brought together in a planned unity for esthetic purpose.

Perhaps the special characteristic of Mr. Shope's work, that which differentiates it most completely from the work of other American etchers, is the faculty, which we are apt to associate with the Gallic temper of mind, of combining an appreciation of large relations with an alert perception of individual and peculiar characteristics, recording the mental picture with extraordinary technical adequacy. There is generalization, but not to the point of excluding particular fidelities, and each plate, however studied, is essentially vital, is charged with a personal emotion, and expresses in a purely personal idiom the significance of the subject to the intelligence at work upon it.

It is an exhibition in the highest degree inspiriting to those concerned for the art in America.

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